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ABSTRACT

An exploratory study investigated preoperational children's understanding of the fictional movie character E.T. (The Extra-Terrestrial). Of 40 participating children (ages 40 to 66 months), 85 percent indicated they had seen the movie. Data were collected according to an interview method, and responses were recorded on audiotape, transcribed, and analyzed in terms of frequencies and percentages. Questions concerned direct aspects/qualities of the fictional character (e.g., Is E.T. alive? What does E.T. look like? Is E.T. an adult or a child? What is E.T.'s sex?). Although an initial examination of the data indicated 50 percent of the children believed E.T. was alive, when responses were inspected by subject's age, it was found that older children were less likely to attribute life to the character. This and additional findings are discussed in reference to the kinds of support children gave for their responses, their tendency to center on a single behavior and perceive it as highly salient, and the egocentric nature of their thought. (RH)

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E.T.: Preschool Children's Perceptions

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E.T.: Preschool Children's Perceptions

One of the most noticeable and fascinating aspects of preschool children's thinking is animism. The attributing of life to inanimate objects has long been recognized as typical of young children. Piaget (1929) postulated four stages in the development of animism: (1) anything may be endowed with purpose and conscious activity; (2) only objects that move are alive; (3) only objects that move spontaneously are alive; and (4) only plants and animals are considered alive. This sequence of animistic thought has been investigated by various researchers (Jahoda, 1958; Looft, 1974; Looft and Bartz, 1969; Lucas, Linke and Sedgick, 1979; Russell and Dennis, 1939; Smeets, 1973) and for the most part has been supported by each. These studies, however, have typically focused on children attributing life to familiar objects in their environments (e.g., cars, plants, bicycles, clouds, the moon, ovens) rather than to novel objects.

The prevalence of mass media in children's lives exposes them to events, situations and phenomena which they cannot directly act upon in order to incorporate in their existing schematic structures. This does not mean children are not acting upon these experiences, but that they are doing so in a manner not best suited to their cognitive skills. Children who are functioning at Piaget's preoperational level act and interact with the environment in a direct manner and thus understand and comprehend it very concretely. Exposure to "non-real" entities presented in the media

(specifically through television and motion pictures) makes it more difficult for children to determine what is "alive" and what is "fantasy." Perhaps the most current example of this is the character and movie E.T., The Extra-Terrestrial.

An informal observation of preschool children shows they are inundated with references to E.T. Parents and teachers often comment on children's remarks concerning E.T. In an effort to better understand young children's conceptions of E.T. an exploratory study was conducted. The specific focus of the investigation was to determine children's understanding of E.T. in terms of their preoperational level of thought. This was accomplished by asking children questions concerning direct aspects/qualities of E.T. (e.g., Is E.T. alive? What does E.T. look like? Is E.T. an adult or a child? What is E.T.'s sex?).

Methodology

Participants in the study were 40 preschool children (17 females and 23 males, ranging in age from 40 months to 66 months). Data were collected by using an interview method and responses were recorded on audio tape. Each child was individually asked a series of brief questions concerning E.T. Responses were later transcribed and analyzed in terms of frequency and percentages. Eighty-five percent of the children indicated they had seen the movie E.T., The Extra-Terrestrial.

Results

An examination of data prior to its analysis on the basis of subjects' age and sex showed noticeable variations in children's responses (see Table 1). While children were approximately equally divided on two items (Is E.T. alive? and Is E.T. an adult?) there were more marked differences on other items (Is E.T. bad or good? and What is E.T.'s sex). All of the children felt people were nice to E.T. The grouping of subjects by age or sex yielded few differences in responses. Older children were more likely to indicate E.T. was male (90% vs. 60%), and boys, regardless of age, were more likely to believe E.T. had friends (78% vs. 59%). An additional area of interest concerned children's descriptions of the appearance of E.T. It was anticipated that because centration typifies preoperational thought these children describe E.T. in terms of single attributes rather than by listing numerous characteristics. This was found to be true as the vast majority of children stated only a single quality of E.T. in response to the question "What does E.T. look like?". Subjects' descriptions included color (brown, black, grey, red, orange, tan, green, and white), facial features (blue eyes, long neck, shape of head, no teeth, no hair, and wrinkles), "red fingers," and a "chest/ stomach which lights up." Very few children commented on E.T.'s size.

Discussion

Although an initial examination of the data indicated 50 percent of the children believed E.T. was alive, when responses were looked at in terms of children's ages, it was found that older children were less likely to

attribute life to E.T. The explanations given by children to support their beliefs that E.T. was alive included: E.T. moves; eats; drinks; speaks; and dies. Of those children who stated E.T. was not alive, 40 percent reached this conclusion because "he is in the movies." This finding may be interpreted in a number of ways. One possibility is that older children were making progress toward achieving more conventional notions of reality. It may also be that they have had greater experience with characters presented in the mass media and have learned that what is depicted often is not real.

With regard to whether E.T. is good, all but two children indicated E.T. is. The explanations offered focused on single behaviors performed by E.T. at some time during the movie (e.g., "flew;" "kissed the girl;" "made flowers grow"). These examples represent the children's tendency to center on a single behavior and perceive it as highly salient. Consistent with this line of thought, whether E.T. was perceived as male or female depended on what type of behavior the children associated with E.T. For example, children who said E.T. was male reached this conclusion on the basis of his "getting bigger;" "working;" and "disobeying." Reasons offered for E.T.'s being female could be categorized as "she likes to be good." When children were asked to indicate whether E.T. was an adult or child there was very little hesitancy on their part. Most responded quickly and with great self-assurance. Again, the basis for their judgements rested on single attributes (e.g., "because he isn't big;" "because he has to get home;" "because he talks like one.")

An additional question was included in the study not because it was designed to offer evidence of children's cognitive processes but because it has been raised as an issue of concern. Specifically, it had been reported by the news media that officials in Scandanavian countries were concerned about adults being portrayed negatively in the motion picture. The children who participated in the present study indicated people of all ages were nice to E.T. One possible explanation for this is their recalling certain instances in the movie in which adults and/or children demonstrated positive behaviors toward E.T. It is equally likely, however, that the egocentric nature of their thought leads them to attribute their own feelings about E.T. to others. This finding is not to be interpreted as indicating adults are projected in a positive manner, only that preoperational level children do not perceive them as being portrayed negatively. It may be that individuals operating at concrete or formal operational levels of thought would respond quite differently to this item because of their ability to dissociate themselves from the portrayal of people, and to draw conclusions about the motives of the characters in the film.

Conclusions

Data gathered in this study revealed that preoperational children's perceptions of E.T. are highly individualistic and rooted in their selective recall of fairly limited, but to them highly salient, characteristics. As a result of their egocentric, animistic and highly centrated thought preschool-

aged children's perceptions of E.T. may be quite different from those of older children and adults. Professionals and parents should bear this in mind when interacting with young children as what may be fantasy to them is reality to the children. Furthermore, what adults may say in jest may be taken quite seriously by young children. It is recommended that additional research be conducted in this area with older children and with children in other cultures to determine if and how perceptions of E.T. change across age groups and cultures. It is anticipated significant differences will be found when children at the concrete operational level are assessed, but that differences across cultures will be almost non-existent as E.T. essentially is a culture-free phenomenon. The conducting of these studies will help us better understand the development of animistic thought when phenomenon not familiar to children are involved, and further our realization/appreciation for the role mass media plays in children's lives.

Table 1. Characteristics of E.T.

Items	Response Percentages				
	All Subjects N=40	Three-years N=20	Four-years N=20	Males N=23	Females N=17
Is E.T. Alive?					
Animate	50.0	60.0	40.0	52.0	47.0
Inanimate	50.0	40.0	60.0	48.0	53.0
Is E.T. bad or good?					
Bad	5.0	10.0	100.0	4.0	6.0
Good	95.0	90.0	0.0	96.0	94.0
Is E.T. an adult or child?					
Adult	47.5	45.0	50.0	48.0	47.0
Child	50.0	50.0	45.0	43.0	53.0
Other	2.5	5.0	5.0	9.0	0.0
Is E.T. male or female?					
Male	75.0	60.0	90.0	74.0	76.0
Female	12.5	25.0	0.0	13.0	12.0
Other	12.5	15.0	10.0	13.0	12.0
Does E.T. have friends?					
Yes	70.0	70.0	70.0	78.0	59.0
No	25.0	20.0	30.0	17.0	35.0
Do not know	5.0	10.0	0.0	5.0	6.0
Are people nice to E.T.?	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

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